States should explore better means of assessing teachers' classroom readiness.

Licensure Tests as Barriers to the Profession

Victoria Van Cleef

At a time when schools are facing the most severe staffing challenges in recent memory and with interest in becoming a teacher a fraction of what it was a generation ago, it has never been more important for state policies to support innovative approaches to teacher hiring and retention and remove unnecessary barriers into the profession.[1]

One policy area that is ripe for a closer look is teacher licensure exams. Most states require prospective teachers to pass one or more standardized tests, usually from the Praxis series, to earn even a provisional license. While these requirements—often set by state boards of education—are well-intentioned efforts to ensure that teachers have a baseline level of knowledge and skills before entering the classroom, they may be doing more harm than good: They are costly to take and administer, and they are weak predictors of teaching ability that screen out a disproportionate number of teachers of color, undermining goals around teacher quality and diversity.

There is a better approach. Instead of relying so heavily on standardized tests to predict teaching ability, states can set more meaningful licensure standards focused on demonstrated teaching ability. And because so many states waived testing requirements during the pandemic, leaders have a rare opportunity to demonstrate the real-world benefits of a new approach—following the lead of states already making the shift—without getting stymied by theoretical concerns about lowering teaching standards.

High Costs, Few Benefits

Licensure standards for any profession must strike a delicate balance: Set a clear, high standard but do not put up barriers that dissuade qualified people from even trying to clear them. With teacher licensure, a state's goal should be to create the minimum number of hurdles necessary

to ensure prospective teachers have the skills they need to help students learn. Requirements that fail to provide valuable information about someone's teaching ability have no good reason to exist.

By this measure, Praxis and most other licensure tests fail badly. They are an expensive burden for prospective teachers, costing as much as $200 per attempt. That is a significant deterrent in the context of a profession that already offers a poor financial value proposition: The average starting teacher salary is only $41,000, made even lower in practice by the student loan debt that nearly half of all educators accumulate (more than $58,000 on average).[2] More than half of all prospective teachers fail licensure tests on their first attempt. Of those, one in five never retake them.[3] Many may have gone on to successful careers in the classroom—to say nothing of the number who choose other professions due to concerns about licensure requirements.

A barrier this substantial is only useful if it reliably predicts a teacher's ability to help students learn. Yet multiple studies have found that scores on licensure tests are weak predictors of success in the classroom and have little effect on student achievement.[4] Most important, they cannot consistently predict teaching ability at the individual level: Even when they point in the right direction overall, they produce far too many "false positives" (weak teachers who pass) and "false negatives" (strong teachers who fail).[5]

Those false negatives are a critical, often-overlooked flaw in the tests. Their failure to consistently predict teaching ability might be more tolerable if the error were always in a helpful direction—that is, if it occasionally screened out good teachers but never screened in bad ones. But the error cuts both ways, meaning that licensure tests regularly allow the wrong prospective teachers into the profession even as they keep some of the right ones out.

My organization has seen this firsthand in our own teacher preparation programs, which have trained more than 50,000 U.S. teachers over the last 25 years. Every year, we see teachers with a proven ability to lead students to big academic gains—as reflected in test scores, classroom observations, and other measures—face the prospect of losing their jobs because of low scores on licensure exams. We also see many teachers who pass licensure tests but struggle in the classroom.

In other words, debates about whether licensure tests set the bar for teaching too low or too high miss the reality that they are not a meaningful bar of any kind—at least not if the goal is to screen for teachers who can help students learn. No matter how much passing a test might feel like clearing a meaningful hurdle, the evidence shows it cannot consistently predict how well someone will teach. Passing these exams is far from a guarantee of effectiveness, and failing is far from a guarantee of ineffectiveness.

Even if licensure tests could reliably predict teaching ability, policies in many states would negate most of their benefit. Defenders of licensure tests often imply it would be a radical change to allow teachers who have not passed into the classroom, but the truth is it happens all the time. Even before the pandemic, most states allowed schools to hire full-time teachers—sometimes for multiple years—before they had passed licensure exams. Several states offer emergency certification to help fill vacancies, while others exempt certain types of schools from licensure rules entirely or create "districts of innovation" that offer additional flexibility. Some states simply set the deadline for passing certification tests up to a year *after* a teacher's first day in the classroom. And nearly all schools hire long-term substitutes, who effectively function as classroom teachers but do not always need to pass licensure tests.

In addition to these exceptions already built into testing requirements, 33 states temporarily waived some or all requirements during the last two years, when the pandemic made administering many licensure tests difficult or impossible. It is safe to estimate that hundreds of thousands of students each year learn from teachers who have not passed licensure tests—with no evidence it affects their school experience significantly one way or another.

A Barrier to Diversity

As if inconsistency in predicting effectiveness was not problem enough, licensure tests actively undermine another urgent priority: diversifying the teacher workforce. When they have teachers of their same race, students of color are less likely to be suspended, more likely to be referred

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to gifted programs, and more likely to enroll in college.[6] TNTP's own research has found that teachers of color have higher expectations for students of color—and that those higher expectations correlate with more learning.[7]

Yet the racial disparity between students and the teacher workforce is large and growing. While more than half of U.S. K-12 students are people of color, more than 80 percent of teachers are White.[8] To bring teacher demographics to parity with student demographics, schools nationwide would need to add a combined one million teachers of color.

A growing number of school systems are working to close this diversity gap by prioritizing both teacher effectiveness and diversity in their recruitment and hiring—only to find that licensure tests keep many talented prospective teachers of color from ever making it to the classroom. ETS, which produces the Praxis test, reports that pass rates are 20 percent lower among Latinx test takers and 40 percent lower among Black test takers compared to White test takers.[9] Other research has shown that Black test takers score lower than White test takers on the Praxis, even after controlling for factors like undergraduate GPAs and parents' education level.[10] In other words, there is no evidence that the racial disparity in scores on licensure tests reflects any real-world disparity in teaching ability.

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Thus prospective teachers of color, who are more likely to have lower incomes, are also more likely to need multiple expensive attempts to pass licensure tests—totaling hundreds or even thousands of dollars. Almost one in three prospective teachers of color abandon their efforts to make it to the classroom after failing a licensure test once.[11] My organization sees every year in our own preparation programs that the cost and stress associated with tests keeps many talented people of color from even taking the first steps toward becoming a teacher. Put simply, current licensure tests effectively place the greatest burden on the teachers that students of color need most following the pandemic disruption.

Observe Ability, Don't Guess It

The idea of moving away from licensure tests remains politically fraught. Even though they are not a meaningful gauge of effectiveness in practice, they appear to be so on the surface, and no leader wants to be seen as "lowering the bar" for teaching. Fortunately, states can start implementing better alternatives to licensure tests without eliminating them right away—and start a more productive conversation about the issue in the process.

This conversation should start with a recognition that the solution to flawed teacher licensure tests is not different tests. Policymakers have tried for decades to find a reliable proxy for teaching ability—a score on one licensure test or another, college grade point average, completion of an advanced degree, or number of years in the classroom. But research and experience have made clear that there is no magical way to predict whether someone will become an effective teacher. It is what author Malcolm Gladwell has called the "quarterback problem": Teaching, like being an NFL quarterback, is a job so difficult and complex that real-world performance is the only way to gauge someone's ability to do it.

Instead of spinning their wheels trying to find or make a better test, state policymakers should reorient teacher licensure rules around a demonstrated ability to help students learn—in student teaching, preservice training, and in a teacher's first years on the job. There is no need to rely on proxies for teaching ability or create extra hurdles for prospective teachers when preparation programs and school systems already observe their performance directly. Such an approach would create the high bar for the teaching profession that testing requirements currently try—but fail—to set.

Making this shift requires allowing some teachers into classrooms before they have passed licensure tests, but since that is already happening in most states, there is little practical or political downside. In the short term, states can simply allow evidence of strong classroom performance as an acceptable substitute for scores on licensure tests. All teacher preparation providers should be required to develop performance-based criteria for granting temporary or initial certification that can substitute for preservice testing requirements. And local school systems should be required to develop similar criteria that can substitute for any tests required for earning full certification. States should then waive any testing requirements for teachers who meet the alternate requirements set by their program or school system.

These measures do not have to include or be limited to student scores on annual reading and math assessments: Classroom observations, assessments of student work, and student surveys—some or all of which are part of many districts' teacher evaluation systems—can provide valuable information on teacher effectiveness. District evaluation ratings themselves could be a potential measure, as could new or existing portfolio-based assessments. States can offer guidelines to help preparation programs and school systems develop these measures. But state boards and state education agencies should not mandate a one-size-fits-all set of criteria; each program and school system should be able to find the best solution rooted in data they already collect—the key to minimizing any additional work required from teachers to meet licensure requirements.

Some policymakers may have concerns about letting individual programs and school systems assess teacher performance, given the lack of differentiation produced by most teacher evaluation systems. But in my organization's work with districts, we have found that even the least rigorous evaluations tend to identify the lowest-performing teachers and especially low-performing early-career teachers—the exact group that is most important for any licensure standard to screen out.

More important, state leaders do not need to settle for a hypothetical debate on this point or any other aspect of a performance-based licensure standard. Since so many teachers are already in classrooms without having passed licensure tests, states should take the opportunity to gather evidence on how current test-based rules compare with the performance-based alternative, focusing on effectiveness, retention, and diversity of teachers certified under different criteria. They should be transparent about the results, so that people on all sides of the debate about licensure tests can see which approach leads to a more effective, diverse teacher workforce.

If the performance-based standard proves to be a better or even as good as standardized tests at predicting future classroom effectiveness, states should make the substitute requirements permanent. They should also then consider eliminating testing requirements entirely—or, at minimum, eliminate any tests that have not shown a strong, reliable connection to individual teacher performance.

States Leading the Way

These alternatives to teacher licensure tests are not theoretical. Several states have already implemented them and shown that they are both logistically and politically possible:

- **New Mexico** recently announced it was ending licensure test requirements entirely and presented a clear case about the high cost and low returns of these tests. The state plans to issue new regulations this summer creating a portfolio process for teacher licensure, based on evidence from a prospective teacher's clinical experiences that show they possess the content and pedagogical knowledge required of new teachers.
- **Colorado** recently passed legislation (currently awaiting the governor's signature) that will offer several alternatives to teachers who do not pass licensure tests—including the ability to submit a portfolio of coursework approved by the state's education department showing they have met the competencies covered on the tests.
- **Mississippi** is piloting a performance-based approach to licensure specifically designed to increase teacher diversity and effectiveness while mitigating teacher shortages. It gives current teachers who have struggled to pass licensure tests an opportunity to earn certification through their evaluation ratings and measures of student learning.
- **Massachusetts** has implemented a performance-based assessment of teaching skills—the Massachusetts Candidate Assessment of Performance, or CAP—aligned to the state's evaluation system for fully certified educators. Prospective candidates must pass CAP during their student teaching to successfully complete their teacher preparation program. A study found that CAP predicts teachers' evaluation ratings during their first year in the classroom more accurately than traditional licensure exams.[12]

Leaders in other states should adopt and build on these efforts to move beyond licensure tests toward requirements rooted in what matters most: a teacher's ability to help all students

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learn and grow. With a willingness to follow the evidence and embrace innovative approaches, state policymakers can create licensure rules that set a high bar for the teaching profession while strengthening efforts to build the talented, diverse teacher workforce students need. ■

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